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ABSTRACT

Identifying and describing students in rural schools who are at potential educational risk is the purpose of this study which involved extensive taped interviews with administrators, teachers and students in selected rural schools in Iowa. Various indicators of educational risk in selected rural environments suggest that students are decidedly disadvantaged by geographic isolation and economic decline. Achieving a high level of community support--beginning with the formation of an active, positive, cooperative relationship between and among students, teachers, administrators and parents--is a necessary step in attaining educational excellence. A collaborative effort with other districts is key to providing a full range of academic, vocational, and extra-curricular activities, and accessing technological advances otherwise unavailable. Curricula must be expanded to prepare students either to remain in their rural communities as contributing citizens, or to leave with confidence and skills. Viable vocational and occupational experiences, high quality personal counseling, and strong counselor-parent partnerships must be available to rural students if they are to maximize career attainment. (JMM)

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RURAL STUDENTS AT RISK

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to help meet the need for identifying and describing students in rural schools who are at potential educational risk. The study, sponsored by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, involved extensive taped interviews with administrators, teachers and students in selected rural schools in Iowa, to identify factors thought to be highly correlated with educational risk.

Examination of various indicators of educational risk in selected rural environments suggests that students are decidedly disadvantaged by geographic isolation and economic decline. Rural districts must take aggressive steps to offset these influences if they hope to achieve educational excellence. The necessary steps include achieving a high level of community support beginning with the information of a active, positive, cooperative relationship between and among students, teachers, administrators and parents. Working cooperatively, rural schools and rural communities must initiate programs that will maintain the schools as the focal point of the community.

Survival for many rural districts will depend on the ability to work collaboratively with other districts in order to provide a full range of academic, vocational and extra-curricular activities. The means must be found within such collaborative endeavors to access the technological advances presently beyond the reach of most rural schools. Additionally, the curricula in rural schools must be expanded to serve two alternative purposes: prepare students to appreciate and remain in their rural communities as contributing citizens, or prepare them with the confidence

and the necessary skills to move out.

Rural students must be guaranteed high quality personal counseling and career guidance needed to mediate the myriad factors impinging on their lives. Counselor-parent partnerships must also be developed to devise strategies for improving parental impact on adolescent career plans. Viable vocational and occupational experiences must be made available to rural students if they are to maximize career attainment.

In order to identify the challenges administrators and teachers face in addressing the needs of rural "at-risk" students the characteristics of this population need to be documented. This is especially problematic because of the dearth of information on rural schools. Data on rural schools collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Educational Statistics have often been summarized with that on large school districts. Minter (1980) in his paper on the Federal response to rural education found that in the case of districts under 300 students, data had been deleted completely as being unimportant.

This paper will attempt to help meet the need for identifying and describing students in rural schools who are at potential educational risk. The study sponsored by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, involved extensive taped interviews with administrators, teachers and students in selected rural schools in Iowa. The data were collected to gain an overall view of the educational process in these schools, to identify the factors thought to be highly correlated with educational risk (Bills, 1986), and to examine indicators of educational risk. Most previous research on educational risk has been focused on students in urban settings. It is these at-risk indicators previously examined in urban settings that are here applied to rural academic settings. In a later report we will assess the

extent to which this interpretation is generalizable to other rural schools.

Any attempt to identify the characteristics of at-risk students in rural settings is complicated not only by a paucity of data but additionally by the lack of agreement on what constitutes a rural school. With the myriad definitions of rural schools to choose from we considered it important to select schools reasonably representative of the diversity which exists among rural schools relative to size, locations, and occupational composition. Each of these schools is considered non-metropolitan since none has an urban center nor is adjacent to a metropolitan area. The communities in which the schools were located each have less than 2,000 residents. Those rural schools selected for this study are:

(1) Meadowcrest High School (district size: 350), in a county considered high agriculture and low blue collar,

(2) Woodland High School (district size: 550), in a county with an even mix of agriculture and blue collar, and

(3) High Oak-Red Falls Senior High School (district size: 800) in a county considered low agriculture and high blue-collar.*

* The names of the high schools used in this paper are not the actual names of the high schools included in our study.

RURAL ISOLATION

Student Services and Programs

A primary factor effecting the educational process in rural schools is rural isolation. The influences of rural isolation were identified consistently by administrators and teachers alike in this study as a primary disadvantage of education in rural schools. For many if not most of the rural schools in the region this isolation translates into limited exposure and limited access to needed educational services such as vocational programs, special education, and gifted education; in turn students fear new experiences and they are unwilling to risk exposure to unfamiliar surroundings. Woodland High School in particular found itself unable to provide an alternative education program for its emotionally handicapped, behavior disordered students. This necessitated what that school's principal called "mix and match" through the local Area Educational Agency (AEA). The principal went on to describe the current situation in his school where five or six students were no longer attending school within the district. The location of the school made it impossible to transport these students to another school large enough to accommodate them all. This resulted in the need for them to be bused individually to other schools equipped to provide the necessary educational services. One of these students was traveling 120 miles a

day. By the principal's own admission, ". . . the population least able to handle the travel are the ones required to do it!"

To a rural English teacher there were distinct disadvantages in trying to teach high school students to do research when the only available information had to come from "a lean, outdated school library." This same teacher admitted that it was probably just as well that her students didn't get a look at a well-equipped public library or they would know "what a sad situation existed in their own school." She was reasonably confident that not having access to a good library caused what she saw as "absolutely no interest whatever in leisure reading," adding that this was probably true for parents and students alike. Numerous teachers mentioned the added burden they felt because it fell on them to provide diverse life experiences for their students to draw upon if only vicariously! "If you don't get it by going to museums, libraries, or reading books what's left ... TV?" "These students are green, less worldly than kids just about anywhere, and it just shocks them when they see what goes on out there. It frustrates some, confuses some ... makes them downright fearful is what it does!"

Student Fears

Teachers shared concerns that their attempts could do little to combat the fear of the unknown which often plagued

the lives of rural students. Teachers saw daily evidence of "questionable decisions ... made on the basis of fear of the unknown," or an inability to imagine things differently than they were. One guidance counselor could identify several students from previous graduating classes who had made significant decisions motivated primarily by fear. He described an academically capable female student with aspirations of attending a small private liberal arts college. The counselor recalled having spent a considerable amount of time with this student and her parents working to secure much needed financial aid. At the last moment she had taken a waitressing job rather than traveling the hundred miles to college. The result was "disappointment but not surprise" on the part of the guidance counselor because the girl's sister had done something almost identical a few years earlier. Similar decisions had been made by other students. One young woman planned to attend a nearby business school to pursue a career in fashion, and another had plans to attend beauty college. Both changed their minds shortly after graduating. One was currently babysitting, the other waiting tables not far from home. There were others, males and females in each school, for whom fear may have played a significant role in abandoned career plans. Several teachers expressed their frustration of not being able to influence these students' decisions. Instead the greatest influence came from parents and friends equally as unfamiliar and

fearful of the world beyond their own rural communities. McIntire, Cobb and Pratt (1986) document the potentially limiting effects of low peer and parental expectations on aspirations of rural students.

Lack of Cultural Diversity

Isolated rural schools also provide limited exposure to cultural diversity. Administrators and teachers alike acknowledged this as a serious disadvantage, and one that could seriously jeopardize students' adjustment in culturally diverse environments such as colleges, universities or the military service. Attempts to remedy this situation such as involvement in foreign exchange programs or other programs sponsored by the Area Education Agency (AEA) have been only minimally successful. The homogeneity and isolation of the rural community have made the adjustment of some foreign exchange students difficult. On at least one occasion these were identified as major influences in the decision of a foreign exchange student to request reassignment to a metropolitan area.

At Meadowcrest High School an AEA sponsored 'Artist in Residence' received mixed reviews. Several high school boys reacted to the presence of the black male dancer by refusing to participate in the activities which he led. The greatest disappointment came when the administrators and teachers were unsuccessful in garnering the support of parents for the

dancer. In the words of one teacher, "It's hard to blame these kids for being short-sighted when their parents don't know any better."

Student Career Aspirations

McIntire et al. (1986) have reported the negative effects of rural isolation on career aspirations and expectations. The distance from metropolitan centers and the economic decline of many of the regions rural communities greatly limits the opportunities for exposure to a full range of career options as documented by Wakefield and Dunkelberger (1984). With few businesses remaining open in many small rural communities, few opportunities remain to observe career models or gain "hands on" experience in the world of work. The available models become major influences for developing career aspirations of young people. Failure to provide alternate means of exposure to career options often limits rural students' choices to those modeled by parents and teachers. This may explain why many of those students intending to complete four-year college degrees aspired to careers in teaching. Not surprisingly, many students aspire to becoming vocational agriculture teachers, home economics teachers, or elementary teachers since people in one of these three roles was named most often by the rural students in this study as the person in their life they would most like to emulate. A significant number of students expected to

move directly into the work force, often following a parental blue-collar model. Many of these students had expressed aspirations of a career in agriculture, although most of them realized that current economic conditions made that a questionable option. Those students considering non-traditional careers, those not modeled or testable in the rural community, often based their aspirations on insufficient or inaccurate information. Students must rely exclusively on information from significant others such as peers, parents, counselors and teachers. McIntire et al. (1986) recognize this phenomenon when stating that a relationship exists between the communicated expectations of these "significant others" and the expressed aspirations of students. In this study, this point was emphasized when four seniors from one school reported aspirations for a career in engineering. In the course of further discussion it became apparent that for only one of these students was the choice a "sound" career decision based on an accurate conception of both educational requirements and occupational demands of the chosen career (Holland, 1966). The other three students had made decisions based on the desire to attend a particular institution known for its engineering reputation, the desire to remain in contact with another student with similar goals or because "engineers make bug bucks." None of these students was able to say whether he or she was enrolled in classes necessary to ensure admission to a four-year college

or more specifically those courses necessary for admission to an engineering program at their preferred institution. When queried about other options should their expressed aspirations fail to materialize, one student responded that he'd "stick around home and join his brother in an autobody business." Another student hadn't thought about much else because he wanted to "stick with his friend," while another stated he would "probably just get an 'ag' (agriculture) degree." Apparent throughout the interviews was the fact that many of the students in the study simply lacked a picture of options present in today's labor market. This was no less the case with those individuals intending to enter the labor market directly after high school graduation. Unfortunately the communities in which they lived lacked the capability to broaden the picture for them or for those "significant others" who influenced them most strongly. The schools I visited for this study offered little in terms of comprehensive career education needed by rural students to compensate for rural isolation and limited exposure.

RURAL ECONOMIC DECLINE

A declining rural economy has additionally affected the lives of students living in rural communities and attending rural schools. Children from families headed by displaced

workers, whether those are blue-collar or agricultural, are children potentially at-risk. Urgency and fear expressed by administrators, teachers, and students became a familiar litany ... of farms that were lost, factories that have closed, businesses that have closed only recently.

Meadowcrest, devastated by the current economy, had lost two car dealerships, one pizza restaurant, a grocery store, one gas station, and a shoe store, all within a one year period. For those I interviewed the litany was quickly translated into lost jobs, lost wages, lost homes and dying communities. The particular details of the devastation were different depending on the person being interviewed. In every school I visited, administrators described what to them were the disastrous results. Collectively they mourned the loss of those bright students, often the children of middle class professionals, whose families had moved into the rural "bedroom" communities years before to take advantage of the high quality of rural life and personalized rural education found there. They chose to leave when economic conditions made it disadvantageous to work in the city and live in the country. Rural administrators fear the results of this drain of some of their "best and brightest" in reducing even more the little diversity found in rural schools. A librarian measured the toll taken by the economic crisis in terms of the dwindling number of school buses needed to pick up farm children living near her. "It used to take three or

four buses to pick up all the farm kids; now nobody's kids are taking over the homeplace, so many of these farm houses are empty. There's no way for a community or a school to survive that way."

In each school college-bound students shared their fears that there would be no way to pay for college. In the past after school jobs or raising livestock were ways of putting money away for college, now "what I earn goes to the family." A senior at Meadowcrest High School, with hopes of becoming a voc-ag educator shared the frustration of her economic situation. She had worked evenings and weekends for two years. From her earnings she was allowed to keep only enough money to pay her school expenses, but she could save nothing for college. "The rest pays the bills to keep the farm going." She said she felt that when she left "it will probably go under." Another sister who was married and employed with a child of her own continues to contribute to the maintenance of the family farm.

Another student, one with a strong academic record, had begun falling asleep in class and had failed a big exam. Her homeroom teacher discovered later that she was out every night until 2:00 a.m., with her father, mother, and grandmother driving a combine. The family could no longer hire help to perform these tasks. Similar stories were told in each school in this study. For some, the pressure to contribute to the support of their struggling family was

intense. At High Oak-Red Falls High School several boys mentioned the name of a manufacturing company that had opened recently twenty-five miles from home. Each was seriously entertaining the thought of leaving school to seek employment, blaming it on the fact that "money was so tight."

Much of what was reported during interviews with individual students centered on the problems created in their lives by existing economic conditions. Student descriptions correspond closely with research by Ken Root of Luther College on displaced workers and their families. It became painfully obvious from the details that rural economic conditions put children at risk educationally and otherwise.

RURAL FAMILY LIFE AND STUDENT STRESS

It is apparent that many rural families are being affected by the rural economic crisis. Rural families considered by many to be almost impervious to the problems plaguing families in the larger society, are experiencing growing rates of divorce and family conflict, according to two AEA school psychologists interviewed for this study. Like students in conflicted non-rural homes, rural students are placed at-risk by these circumstances. The effects felt by agricultural-rural students, however, are seriously compounded by the lack of differentiation between the

personal lives of family members, and their occupational/work lives. In each school, teachers and students alike credit the current economic problems facing farm families with creating additional problems. Almost without exception, interviews with students whose parents were involved in agriculture included comments about adjustments that had to be made to "all the anger" or "all the fighting my folks do," or the refusal on the part of one or both parents to provide reasons for their tears and depression. Students themselves recognized the need for help but felt powerless to help their parents. "My dad was mad at everybody. He wouldn't talk to any of us about what was bugging him. He was either yelling or just moping around!" One voc-ag teacher said, "These people are notoriously close-mouthed anyway, so now many kids are 'feeling' the repercussions of the situation with nobody around at home willing (or able) to talk about it." To one home-economics teacher interviewed it was a serious situation for students. "The kids talk about it constantly, it's always on their minds." A rural industrial arts teacher reported having to exercise additional caution when confronting students. "Kids are likely to fly off the handle over the littlest things some days." "You really have to know what's going on at home, and in their heads."

A source of stress mentioned frequently was that felt within the family when farm mothers and/or fathers were forced to take jobs off the farm. Students reported

increased conflict between parents as they sought to meet the demands of both farm and off-the-farm jobs. The greatest amount of conflict seemed to result from situations where farm wives were forced by economic crisis to seek jobs, but economic conditions prevented the farm operator from hiring additional help. In such cases students are usually expected to contribute additionally to the maintenance of the farm. Students reported feeling "overworked" or "pulled in too many directions" trying to keep up with the demands of home and school. School work often suffers as a result. The cumulative effects of the economic crisis signaled an ever-growing need for the support services of counseling/mental health professionals in the lives of rural students. Unfortunately, rural isolation and dwindling budgets in many rural school districts and communities increases the likelihood that these needs will go unmet.

A home-economics teacher pointed out the "irony of the situation." Without intending to, we are eliminating the only opportunities some students have at their disposal to deal with their problems. As the economic situation in rural communities worsens, greater numbers of families leave, decreasing enrollments and hence decreasing operating budgets in rural schools. With limited financial resources districts are forced to make hard choices. These include curricular choices which have led primarily to cutbacks in vocational education programs. The irony is that these voc-ag,

industrial arts, and home economics classes appear to be the part of the curriculum with the flexibility to provide an environment in which students feel comfortable dealing with the problematic conditions in their lives. This premise was strongly supported by reports from students. When asked where or to whom they would turn for help, the vast majority of students identified a vocational educator in their school. When this was not the case the student was more likely to seek the support of a guidance counselor or coach before that of a teacher in an academic course. "Mr. ____ (the voc-ag teacher) is always interested in what's eating at us. He knows how hard it is to think about school when your farm is being sold." Similar references were made to other vocational instructprs. Sadly few students reported having similar opportunities in academic courses. This was especially so of upper level/college-track courses. This is at least a partial explanation why numerous vocational teachers described their students as "seriously affected" or "preoccupied" with their situations, while teachers in college track courses were more likely to minimize the effects. The voc-ag teacher in one school in this study told of a situation that at one time would have seemed out of the ordinary but not so now. He recalled a night recently when he was on the phone from midnight until 2:00 a.m., trying to keep a drunken mother from hurting her daughter, who was one of his students. "These kids have to deal with so many

things completely out of their control, I'm surprised they can function as well as they do."

GOALS OF STUDENTS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

One of the most significant consequences of the current rural economic situation is the effect it is having on students' goals, especially those students not going on to school. In her book, Worlds of Pain, Lillian Rubin states, "In order to plan for the future you must believe it possible to control your fate, belief that can only be held if it is nourished in experience" (p. 38). Repeatedly, students echoed the disbelief and despair felt by parents concerning both their present situation and future plans. According to one rural guidance counselor, "Student motivation to prepare or plan has been affected." "I think it is much harder to make big decisions ... and some smaller ones for that matter!" The future envisioned by many rural students includes either taking over the family farm or following parental footsteps into blue-collar employment. Students reluctantly acknowledged the fate of either of these plans but appeared powerless to replace them with new, more viable ones. For many rural students their reality changed drastically in a short time. Teachers and administrators admitted their uncertainty in mediating this dilemma, yet

most recognized the effects of these changes on the lives of students. According to teachers students responded variously to their situations. Students were described in a number of ways including, "apathetic," "unmotivated," "indifferent," and "depressed." One troubled student blamed his family farm situation for his "inability to get a hold on things."

Regardless of the manner in which rural students react to the conditions facing them, they are being deeply affected according to one AEA school psychologist interviewed for this study. He contends the degree to which these conditions pose educational risk is largely determined by the ability and willingness of rural schools to get involved in providing responsive, supportive environments, equipped to provide the resources students need. In Tally's Corner, Elliot Liebow remarks that "the future orientation of the middle class presumes among other things a belief that the future will be sufficiently stable to justify the investment of self... time...energy...money" (p. 65). Rural students must depend on their teachers and schools to provide them with a realistic picture of alternative goals, while at the same time providing students with the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to accomplish the goals. It becomes a major responsibility of rural schools to help students deal with the stress in their lives while at the same time equipping them with the skills necessary to view the future positively and become productive members of society.

INDICATORS OF EDUCATIONAL RISK

Truancy

Student attendance is a visible indicator of potential problems in school. Interviews with administrators and teachers in this study suggest truancy is not considered a serious problem in rural schools. Rather than being the direct result of positive educational programs offered by the schools, the lack of truancy results from the role which the school serves in meeting students' affiliative needs and the apparent failure of rural communities to provide attractive diversions. There is little variety among the reasons for attending school offered by the rural high school students in this study. Students admitted coming to school because "this is where all my friends are," ..."there's nobody to talk to at home," ..."there's no place else to go," ..."do you see anything else to do in this town?" While the majority of students in three selected rural Iowa high schools chose to attend school rather than be truant, high school attendance rates should not necessarily be accepted as proof of the absence of educational risk.

Academic Achievement

Low academic achievement is an obvious indicator of educational risk. Those who conduct research and work in rural education have long been aware of the dearth of

information on academic achievement for rural schools. The limited picture of academic performance in rural schools results from the fact that in the past, data on rural schools collected by the National Center on Educational Statistics has most often been summarized with that of large schools and therefore not usefully reported, or not reported at all (Minter, 1980). This is particularly troubling because it means that for over 25% of the operating school districts in the U.S. (4,130 districts under 300) data are unavailable for use in the diagnosis and intervention of educational risk (Williams and Wolf, 1978).

The recently prepared Status Report of Rural Districts in the United States Under 300 Students (Barker, Muse and Smith, 1986) provides a welcome addition to the data on small rural schools. This report presents what could only be described as a "glowing picture" of small rural schools, which suggests minimal likelihood of educational risk in these schools. According to the responding administrators (79.2% response rate), 50% felt students were "close to the national average" on most recently administered national tests of achievement; 33% rated students "above the national average"; 9% rated students "well above the national average"; and only 7% rated students "below the national average.

If these responses are truly representative of the academic performance in rural schools in the region, can we

assume that students are at minimal educational risk? There was general agreement among superintendents and principals interviewed for this study that school administrators usually present their best side to the public. Conversations they had at annual meetings of rural school administrators, however, included considerable talk about declining academic performance and other problems facing rural schools. When asked to characterize the academic performance of the students in their schools, administrators in this study acknowledged the fact that students were scoring at or near the national average on standardized achievement tests. Only the principal of High Oak-Red Falls High School additionally offered "the rest of the story." To him the performance of students in his high school compared with other students in the State of Iowa was of greater importance than national comparisons. "These are the scores that matter. These are the kids they'll compete with for college entrance and jobs. But you won't hear many rural principals around here talk about state norms!" He was confident from conversations with other rural administrators that there was a consensus among administrators on this point. "There's not a rural administrator in the state that wants to let the blemishes show; not now when necks are on the block, and legislators want to chop them off." He added that "The ones having serious problems won't tell anybody about them; they can't afford to." Administrators could report student performance

relative to national norms without revealing serious problems, while at the same time being fully aware that these scores might translate into a much less "glowing picture" in most states in the region. This was exactly the case in the schools in this study. When the scores of students in ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades were compared with their grade cohorts throughout Iowa on the Iowa Test of Educational Development they consistently rank below the 50th percentile, with several classes ranking in the bottom quartile. Further indication of educational risk might be inferred from the tremendous range among the percentile scores in these schools. The range of percentile scores for most classes was from some point in the bottom decile up to the 99th percentile. These scores would indicate that rural Iowa schools have a population of students considered to be educationally at-risk.

American College Testing (ACT) data available for students in this study confirm educational risk in these selected schools. Unlike those schools where college entrance exams are taken by only the top quarter of the junior class and therefore of little use in generalizing to the class as a whole, over half of the juniors in the study had taken the ACT exam. At least this many had taken ACT exams during the previous three of four years. This is due largely to advice given to students by teachers and guidance counselors that they "keep their options open." As the

number of students taking these exams has grown in the last ten years, the scores have fallen from the mid-twenties down to their present level near the national average (18). This combined with information on score ranges available for three of the schools in the study (9-31, 12-27, 8-32) confirm the wide range of academic performance indicated by standardized achievement tests, and the likelihood of a sizeable population, tested and not tested, of rural students at educational risk.

Dropout Rates

Dropout rates provide a readily observable indicator of educational failure. It has been documented broadly by Catterall (1985) and others (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1986) that dropping out of high school has adverse consequences for society as well as for the dropout. Small rural schools when compared with urban schools or the nation as a whole, exhibit significantly lower dropout rates (Barker et al., 1986). In Iowa the current dropout is between 2%-5% of students in grades 7-12 (Iowa Department of Public Instruction, 1985-86). This was consistent with dropout rates in the schools in this study as well. Unfortunately these rates are beginning to increase after remaining stable for a considerable period of time. Conversations with school superintendents suggest possible explanations for the changes. Growing numbers of rural students are being

compelled to contribute substantially to the maintenance of family farms. Because of the limited availability of part-time employment in most rural communities students consider leaving school for full-time employment. Students see this as a reasonable solution to the economic problems facing their rural families. Comments by several teachers suggested that students were experiencing greater difficulty balancing academic demands with those of employment.

The principal of High Oak-Red Falls High School posited the growth of "rural ghettos" as the rationale for growing dropout rates in his district. According to his records six out of eight (75%) students who dropped out of high school between September and February of the 1986-87 had come from the same small town a few miles away. The principal described the town as a town of less than 200 residents that had virtually died; leaving only those who couldn't afford to relocate, in contrast to his "struggling" town of 2,000 residents which produced only two dropouts. Although the proportions differed, similar patterns were indicated in each of the schools in this study.

Teachers and administrators also referred to a growing population of "transients" as a cause of rising dropout rates. Identified as families "who move into a community seeking low cost housing," "many staying less than a month... until the rent comes due." These families are often the residents of "rural ghettos." The children of these families

are often academically deficient when compared with their age cohort, thus increasing the likelihood that they will become dropouts. Rural teachers appeared frustrated with this special 'at-risk' population for what they saw as good reason; "They affect the morale of teachers and students alike; they tap already scarce resources, and they inevitably drop out."

Continuation Rates

High school graduation is a critical juncture in the educational process. The next step is the student's decision to continue on to some form of postsecondary schooling. McIntire et al. (1986) have documented that rural youth do not aspire to postsecondary education as frequently as those in either urban or suburban schools. In the schools that provided informal follow-up data on recent graduates, the continuation rates for the classes graduating in 1984 ranged from 40% - 57%. These figures are based on guidance counselors' recollection of student plans at graduation from high school. In the same schools for the most recent graduating classes the expected continuation rate range from 59-65%. These continuation rates are higher than those reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics for the nation (NCES) as a whole, and higher than figures reported by McIntire et al. (1986), who documented the continuation rates of rural youth in Maine. It is unclear

whether the data from these selected Iowa rural schools warrants optimism as an indicator of minimal educational risk. The continuation rates reported to us by administrators consist of students' expressed postsecondary aspirations and enrollment in some or all college track courses offered in the high school. None of the rural schools in this study has a mechanism to assess how closely these student-reported aspirations correspond with what McIntire et al. (1986) differentiates as "manifest aspirations"; what students actually do with their lives. We lack the data to determine how many students actually enter postsecondary institutions or how many of those who enter remain to complete a postsecondary program or degree. Data on matriculation and persistence gathered informally from guidance counselors suggest that while over half of the recent graduates of these three Iowa rural high schools reported aspiring to some type of postsecondary institution upon graduation, half of them either failed to matriculate or dropped out prior to completion of a program or degree. Without adequate follow-up data including reasons for program discontinuance it is difficult to generalize about student-reported continuation rates as an indicator of educational risk.

While these rural administrators offer high rates of expressed postsecondary aspirations as verification of the academic health of their rural schools, other data suggest

these rates to be the results of several factors. Due to growing external pressure placed on schools to better prepare students for rapidly changing societal conditions, often translated as sending more students on to college, high schools are expected to raise their standards in the process. In his analysis of educational reform Levin (1986) documents the effects of this phenomenon. In order to accommodate this at a time of declining enrollment and decreasing dollars, rural administrators have to justify the expenditure of limited resources for college preparatory classes in math, science, foreign language and computer science when traditionally only 15 or 20% of rural students in the school aspired to a four-year college and had need for the classes. Greater justification is found if an increasing number of students have reason to take college-track courses. In each school, administrators, guidance counselors and teachers admitted strongly encouraging the majority of students to "keep all options open", which was translated by students to mean enrolling in college-track courses, "just in case." As one student in Woodland High School described it, "In this school, anybody who isn't in the L.D. room is in college track classes." While this is undoubtedly an exaggeration, it is one explanation for increasing numbers of students expressing postsecondary aspirations.

Increased expressed postsecondary plans may have less to do with what they expect to do after graduation and more to

do with what they interpret to be the 'appropriate' success model held up by school personnel and students. Comments by students in all three schools suggest that they perceive students with four-year college aspirations as the "most successful", and students with community college aspirations "more successful than students intending to enter the labor market directly from high school. The expectations of peers may complement those of school personnel.

Conversations with several students indicated some confusion on their part concerning the viability for them of upper level classes in math and science, especially when their career goal required vocational training. An example of this was a student from Woodland High School who aspired to be a courtroom clerk and said she was taking college-track classes "because she had already taken the only typing class her school offers" so now she was taking the courses her teachers were encouraging her to take. A senior at Meadowcrest was taking college-track classes so he could go to college to be a mechanic. He was unaware of the differences between what he needed to pursue a vocational degree versus what he needed to enter a four-year college. He was taking college track courses "just in case." In each case students accepted the admonitions of guidance counselors and teachers against "limiting their future options." As documented by McIntire et al. (1986), a relationship appears to exist between the communicated expectations of

"significant others" such as school counselors, teachers and peers and resulting "expressed aspirations of the students.

McIntire's finding suggest that family members are most influential in students postsecondary planning, and interviews with students suggest there may be considerable difference between the communicated aspirations of school personnel and those of rural parents. In the more than thirty-five students interviews, only three female students reported that their parents had definite expectations that included postsecondary education. The remainder of the students described parental response to future plans exactly as McIntire et al. (1986) reported it for rural parents in Maine. When asked what their parents were expecting them to do following high school graduation the vast majority responded that parents did not care. Many felt parents were probably most supportive of them finding a full-time job but "wouldn't care" if they went away to school. Our data suggest that parental responses may be inversely related to the educational level of the parents.

High communicated expectations of school personnel may influence the expressed aspirations of rural youth, leading to increasing numbers of students considering postsecondary education. However, our findings suggest that the low-communicated expectations of rural parents may be strongly influencing manifest aspirations of rural youth, keeping some

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High communicated expectations of school personnel may influence the expressed aspirations of rural youth, leading to increasing numbers of students considering postsecondary education. However, our findings suggest that the low-communicated expectations of rural parents may be strongly influencing manifest aspirations of rural youth, keeping some

students from pursuing and/or completing postsecondary plans beyond graduation.

Given the wide range of scores on standardized tests taken by rural Iowa students (Iowa Test of Educational Development and American College Testing Exam) it is likely that some students "aspiring" to further schooling are unsuccessful because they are academically unprepared. This premise is strongly suggested by the candid admission of High Oak-Red Fall's newly hired principal that half of the students in each class in his high school are reading below grade level. This certainly affects school performance, test performance, self-concept and chances of successfully completing most postsecondary programs.

For those teachers responsible for teaching advanced courses in math and science for groups of students with a wide range of academic ability it becomes necessary to "teach to the middle." This was the phrase used in every school to explain how teachers were assured that everyone was accommodated. Teachers unashamedly described the challenge of "watering down coursework" or diluting the curricula to make it manageable for the less able "who want to keep their options open" while at the same time not sacrificing the needs of those certain to face the rigors of a four year college. An upper level teacher in High Oak- Red Falls High School echoed the concern expressed by teachers in every school when she stated "Sometimes I think everybody loses in

the long run. They might get enough to get a passing grade but I'm not sure what else." A teacher at Meadowcrest High School saw the greatest disadvantage for the top students. "They leave here without ever being really challenged and they get a false sense of security that can really be shattered when they get to college."

At the same time that rural high schools are directing dwindling resources into expanding the college track curriculum, they are less able to respond to the needs of the students expecting to enter the labor market directly from high school. Vocational courses, once the curricular mainstay of students without postsecondary aspirations have been cut drastically or eliminated in many Iowa rural schools according to the voc-ag instructor at Woodland High School. His job has changed in the last three years from being full-time voc-ag teacher with a curriculum that included Voc-Ag I, II, III and IV to the current situation. He now travels between Woodland and two other small rural high schools providing what he referred to as "just a couple of basic voc-ag courses" at each.

Administrators and teachers alike identified this non-college-bound student population as most 'at-risk' in rural schools. Faced with a rapidly changing labor market and insufficient economic resources, which have seriously eroded vocational offerings, rural schools are unable to respond with much beyond the basic courses mandated by the state.

Beyond these courses there appears to be little available to aid these students in becoming fully productive members of society. Wakefield and Dunkelberger (1984) document the fact that occupational attainments of rural youth are seriously hampered by the lack of vocational and occupational opportunities available in rural areas. Limited educational opportunities combine with limited occupational opportunities to produce high school graduates with questionable marketability. Geographic relocation to urban areas is often a prerequisite to any but the most menial jobs. The informal follow-up data from our three high schools suggests that most of the rural youths who graduate, and those who go directly into the labor market or those who do so after dropping out of a postsecondary program, find employment in low-paying entry level positions close to home. Due to the current economic situation in many rural communities this often means having to piece together several part-time jobs to make ends meet. According to follow-up data from 83-84 graduates of High Oak-Red Falls High School 7% are currently unemployed. This may be due both to market conditions and marketability of those who seek employment. High school graduation does not preclude rural students from being at-risk.

CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Anne Campbell, writing for the National Rural Education Forum, states that rural youth need, just as their

urban and suburban counterparts, the knowledge and skills to enter and remain competitive in an increasingly complex world. This is the guarantee that we must be able to offer to students of all educational institutions whether urban, suburban or rural.

Our examination of various indicators of educational risk in selected rural environments suggests that rural students are decidedly disadvantaged by geographic isolation and economic decline. Individually and in combination these factors increase the likelihood that rural students will be at risk, now and in the future. Therefore it is our recommendation that rural districts take the steps necessary to offset the influences of these factors.

The existing limitations on rural districts suggest that the greatest chance for success in this endeavor will come as a result of a series of collaborative relationships. Paul Nachtigal (1979) argues that school issues are community issues in rural areas and that the characteristics of effective rural schools are the same as effective schools anywhere. They must have an extremely high level of community support, so a strong alliance between rural schools and rural communities is mandated. A necessary first step in building the school community alliance, and a step strongly supported by our findings is establishing a positive, cooperative relationship between and among students, teachers, administrators and parents. The farther today's

educational expectations are from those experienced in the past by rural parents the greater the likelihood that the influence of these "significant others" will be counterproductive. The discrepency between the low communicated expectations of rural parents and the high communicated expectations of school staff identified in our study strongly suggests the need for parental involvement in career/life-choice education. If rural students are to have the same options available to them as are available to their urban and suburban counterparts given today's rapidly changing labor market, they will need to be supported by school personnel and parents who are more aware of the role education plays in providing a full range of life choices. In their study of rural minority youth Lee and Thomas (1983) stress that counselor-parent partnerships must be developed to devise strategies for improving parental impact on adolescent career focus. Students cannot be expected to strive for something they do not personally value or that those most important to them do not respect.

At a time when geographic isolation and economic decline place rural students at risk rural schools will need to form partnerships with local communities that will maximize the inherent strengths of both. Working cooperatively rural schools and rural communities must initiate programs that will maintain the school as the focal point of the community in order to overcome the weakness. One possible form for

this partnership is the development of a community service program. Opportunities for student involvement could be found throughout any rural community. Students could gain self-confidence, exposure and work experience, while contributing to the growth and health of their communities. Lewis (1982) documents the overwhelmingly positive results of such collaborative efforts when she points out that the curricula in rural schools must serve two purposes, to prepare students to appreciate and remain in their communities or to prepare them to have the confidence and skills to move out. Rural schools together with rural communities must work to prepare their students for a variety of futures.

Currently regional cooperatives such as Iowa's Area Education Agencies are working collaboratively with rural schools to provide them with most of the specialized support they receive. Our data strongly suggest that the needs of rural districts are greater than those now being dealt with by these agencies. Various authors have documented the need for the increased practice of pooling resources and technologies among smaller rural districts to expand opportunities efficiently and effectively to rural youth (Campbell, 1985; Lee and Thomas, 1983; Commission on Rural Resources). For many districts, survival and effective education will depend on their ability to consolidate or form partnership with other districts that would allow them to

offer a full range of academic, vocational, and extracurricular opportunities, equal to that available in non-rural environments. Area Education Agencies might expand their responsibilities to include the organization and maintenance of such inter-district partnerships.

Individually or in cooperation with other districts, the means must be found that will allow rural schools to take advantage of the technological advances available in education. Throughout the Midwest, rural districts have begun to form partnerships with expansive computer networks, others are expanding their curricular offerings through the use of television transmissions. Based on her search for excellence in rural education Anne Lewis (1982) states that technology can provide rural schools with greater flexibility in curriculum and can overcome distance, transportation and cost barriers rural schools face in providing quality programs.

Our study revealed that many rural students are at risk today because they are being victimized by a variety of social, educational, and economic factors. In school students are expected to pay attention, complete their work and eventually graduate from high school. In order to meet the educational expectations set by and for them rural students must be guaranteed the counseling and guidance they need to mediate the factors impinging on their lives. Currently in rural schools guidance counselors are unable to

meet the personal counseling needs of students as well as the career guidance which is their primary assigned function. If rural students are to be expected to function educationally or otherwise in the face of myriad stresses they must have available to them higher quality counseling than is currently available. The current situation in most rural schools necessitates a severe crisis situation before a trained helper, usually an AEA school psychologist, is asked to intervene. In the future school counselors must be trained to be effective personal counselors and career counselors and then be given the flexibility and support to perform these functions adequately.

The data from our study suggests an expanded role for rural school career guidance counselors. They must make greater efforts to work closely with students and their parents to ensure that both parties have occupational and educational information adequate to facilitate expanded career options and higher expectations. Additionally guidance counselors must establish cooperative relationships with a variety of actors beyond the school. In order for rural students to maximize their educational experience they must have an accurate picture of the qualities, skills, and abilities needed to become productive members of society. This picture must come from the experiences planned and provided for students by guidance counselors and other school personnel. An accurate picture of the world of work must

come to rural students from a variety of sources. Counselors will need to establish working relationships with a range of business and industrial concerns representative of the occupational options available beyond high school. Working relationships with nearby community colleges and vocational-technical institutions could provide vital technical training for students not aspiring to education beyond high school.

School districts hoping to achieve educational excellence must be willing to take whatever steps are necessary to improve their capability to meet the needs of all of their students --- especially those educationally at risk. At a minimum these steps include improved personal and career counseling for students, parent education, inter-district cooperation to provide adequate school programs and curriculum and school-community collaboration to maximize the use of scarce rural resources.

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